AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS AND CLAIM LISTING

The listing of the claims immediately below, in which certain amendments are highlighted, replaces all prior versions of the claims provided in this application. Amendments to the claims previously entered in this application have not been highlighted herein.

1. (Currently amended) An auction server system in which is stored and in which operate instructions for a computer-implemented method for an on-line auction of the type wherein a plurality of customers may receive, via said auction server system, an offer of a product supplied by one of at least two merchants, said product comprising a plurality of Program Terms, said method comprising the steps of:

said auction server system acquiring, over a network, customer information from each of said plurality of customers, said customer information including an explicit ranking from most important to said customer to least important to said customer of said Program Terms, the Program Term ranked as most important to said customer being defined as that customer's Preferred Program Term;

said auction server system automatically selecting one of said Program Terms and grouping each of said plurality of customers into one or more pools prior to an auction, said customers grouped together which have indicated as their Preferred Program Term said selected one of said Program Terms;

said auction server system providing to said at least two merchants data regarding said grouped together customers, said data providing access to certain of each said customer's qualifications for participating in said offer, whereby said at least two merchants may independently evaluate the qualifications of each said customer for participating in said offer;

said auction server system receiving, over said network, from each of said at least two merchants an offer to provide said product to said plurality of customers, each said offer:

is made collectively to said grouped together customers; and

provides to each said grouped together customer an individual offer to participate;

said auction server system comparing said offers from said at least two merchants, and based on said comparison, selecting as a Preferred Offer one of said offers from said at least two merchants;

said auction server system notifying each said grouped together customer individually, over said network, of said Preferred Offer;

said auction server system providing each said grouped together customer a finite period of time within which said Preferred Offer may be accepted and a mechanism for indicating acceptance;

said auction server system tallying acceptances of said offer; and

said auction server system providing notification to said merchant associated with said Preferred Offer as to which of said grouped together customers have accepted said Preferred Offer in the provided period of time.

2. (Currently amended) The ~~method~~ auction server system of claim 1, wherein said grouping step includes further grouping of said customers via characteristic pooling, using

characteristics specific to the customers in accordance with a Program Term associated with said characteristics of said customers.

3. (Currently amended) The ~~method~~ auction server system of claim 1, wherein said grouping step includes further grouping of said customers via commitment pooling associated with the customers' level of commitment to accept the bid from one of said at least two merchants.

4. (Currently amended) The ~~method~~ auction server system of claim 1, wherein potential customers are grouped into ghost pools, and wherein said at least two merchants bid on said ghost pools to obtain the right to offer said product to a previously agreed upon number of said potential customers.

5-7. Previously cancelled

8. (Currently amended) The ~~method~~ auction server system of claim 3, wherein said level of commitment is determined by a prior affirmative commitment by said customers to purchase said product in accordance with said Preferred Offer.

9. (Currently amended) The ~~method~~ auction server system of claim 4, wherein said ghost pool comprises all customers indicating an interest in participating in said offer during a particular time frame.

10-26. Previously cancelled

27. (Currently amended) An auction server system in which is stored and in which operate instructions for a computer-implemented method for an on-line auction of the type wherein a plurality of customers may receive, via said auction server system, an offer for a product supplied by one of at least two merchants, said product comprising a plurality of Program Terms, said method comprising the steps of:

said auction server system acquiring, over a network, customer information from each of said plurality of customers, said customer information including an explicit ranking from most important to said customer to least important to said customer of said Program Terms, the Program Term ranked as most important to said customer being defined as that customer's Preferred Program Term;

said auction server system automatically selecting a first one of said Program Terms and grouping together into a first pool those of said plurality of customers who have indicated as their Preferred Program Term said selected first one of said Program Terms;

said auction server system dividing said first one of said Program Terms into a number of First Program Term Bid Units;

said auction server system determining a unit value for each First Program Term Bid Units;

said auction server system automatically selecting a second one of said Program Terms and grouping together into a second pool those of said plurality of customers who have indicated as their Preferred Program Term said selected second one of said Program Terms;

said auction server system dividing said second one of said Program Terms into a number of Second Program Term Bid Units such that a determined unit value for each Second Program Term Bid Unit is the same as the unit value for each First Program Term Bid Unit;

said auction server system forming a Term Ratio as the ~~ration~~ ratio of the number of First Program Term Bid Units to the number of Second Program Term Bid Units;

said auction server system combining said first and second pools into a combined pool;

said auction server system providing to said at least two merchants data regarding said grouped together customers, said data providing access to certain of each said customer's qualifications for participating in said offer, whereby said at least two merchants may independently evaluate the qualifications of each said customer for participating in said offer;

said auction server system creating a Term Ratio Offer comprising said first one of said Program Terms and, using said Term Ratio to value said second one of said Program Terms as a function of a value of said first one of said Program Terms, alternatively said second one of said Program Terms;

said auction server system receiving, over said network, from each of said at least two merchants an offer to provide said product to said plurality of customers, including at least said Term Ratio Offer, each said offer:

is made collectively to said customers in said combined pool; and

provides to each of said customers in said combined pool an individual offer to participate;

said auction server system comparing said offers, and based on said comparison, selecting as a Preferred Offer one of said offers from said at least two merchants;

said auction server system individually notifying each of said customers in said combined pool, over said network, of said Preferred Offer;

said auction server system providing each of said customers in said combined pool a finite period of time within which said Preferred Offer may be accepted and a mechanism for indicating acceptance;

said auction server system tallying acceptances of said offer; and

said auction server system providing notification to said merchant associated with said Preferred Offer as to which of said customers in said combined pool have accepted said Preferred Offer in the provided period of time.

28. (Currently amended) The ~~method~~ auction server system of claim 27, having further stored thereon and in which operate instructions comprising the steps of:

said auction server system determining an equating factor which equates the values of the First and Second Program Term Bid Units of a first of said merchants to the First and Second Program Term Bid Units of a second of said merchants, respectively, to thereby provide an Equating Ratio between the First and Second Program Term Bid Units of said first of said

merchants to the First and Second Program Term Bid Units of said second of said merchants, respectively; and

said auction server system using said Equating Ratio to compare an offer of said product from said first of said at least two merchants to an offer of said product from said second of said at least two merchants.

29. (Currently amended) The ~~method~~ auction server system of claim 27, having further stored thereon and in which operate instructions comprising the steps of:

said auction server system determining a normalizing function for normalizing the values of the First and Second Program Term Bid Units of a first of said merchants and the First and Second Program Term Bid Units of a second of said merchants, respectively; and

said auction server system converting offers from said first and second of said at least two merchants into normalized offers, respectively, using said normalizing function.